

A Highly Selective Comment
on the Government's Cmnd.
9469 Entitled 'Better
Schools'

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"Only those who take leisurely what the people of the world are busy about, can be busy about what the people of the world take leisurely" Chang Ch'ao

What has worried some educationalists since the Labour Prime Minister's speech at Ruskin College is the vague threat of centralising the curriculum through government dictat. Centralised curricula cannot incorporate the needs of local areas or indeed the needs of the individual child. This was demonstrated to me very forcefully, when I joined a party of student teachers on a visit to Czechoslovakia. The school curriculum was so tightly prescribed that each member of staff knew what had to be taught on a particular day. As I visited several different schools around the country, I witnessed a series of English lessons being developed along very similar lines which had been laid down by the Czechoslovakian government. I was informed how efficient this was, for the government knew, or thought it knew, what was being taught and when. The one text book permitted in the classroom was issued by the ministry. By so directing the curriculum, the government thought it knew how efficient its education system was. However it became clear that the standard set was for the average intelligence of the school population and both above and below average children were not being well served.

Centralised curricula have another disadvantage: it is open for governments to influence the future set of voters. In 1983, I had the pleasure of visiting a number of primary schools in Zimbabwe. Whilst there, I came across a new history text book which the Zimbabwean government was introducing into its primary schools. This text book had a whole new slant to Zimbabwe's beginnings and naturally the largest section was the birth of the ZANU PF party and its rise to power.

Universal education in this country was very carefully organised after the war to be devolved to the responsibility of local rather than national government. Devon's Chairman of the Education Committee, Mr Pinney, has said that the *raison d'être* of local government would no longer remain if a national government should take over the local authorities' power and organisation in education. This devolution of power keeps the education of this country out of a too tighter grasp of national government.

Devolution of education has not given rise to very divergent curricula in our schools. In the primary sector where no prescribed external examinations are set, the government has seen a general broadening of the curriculum (Better Schools, Section 5). The Better Schools document offers very non-prescriptive purposes of learning at school (*ibid.*, Section 44): none of the six purposes listed could be described as dictats open to abuse by any future central government.

Education is too important to be handed over to any one section of the local community. The present [March, 1985] Secretary of State for Education wanted to give parents a majority vote on each school's governing body. Quite rightly, parent organisations and interest groups generally rejected this idea. Most parents have a short-term interest in a school and once their children have left they usually sever their association. Local interests can be damaging for a school. In one village primary school I knew, the local managers, as the primary governors were once so named, wanted the Head to appoint a teacher who could play cricket because although the post did not require this skill, the village team needed an additional member to make up its full quota.

The present governing bodies have a watching brief over their school. While the local authority holds the purse strings, this authority divested in each governing body can only be titular. If the governing body is truly representative of the community and has a balanced group of lay and professional representation then it deserves strengthening.

This government, while wishing to give more authority to the community and in particular the parents on each governing body, takes away the power that governing body has, for example over its class sizes. Each governing body, along with its educational authority, is responsible for the admission of children to its school. The Education Act 1980 requests schools to print the local authority's recommended yearly intake in its school brochure. If the school is deemed full by the local authority and its governors, a parent may make representation to an appeals panel to try and overrule these two bodies. The appeals panel has to consider if the entry of an additional child would be prejudicial to the education of the other children in that year group or class. Even if prejudice is proved, the local panel has been known to order a school to accept an additional child. The appeals panel is free to ignore the regulations of the space required for the education of children set out in the Education Act 1981 which increased the teaching area for pupils aged nine to eleven to permit a wider range of facilities to be offered in each school. With the new representation on schools' governing bodies, this appeals panel should be dissolved.

The accommodation in most schools built over twenty years ago is now quite inadequate for the variety needed in the demands of the new curriculum. The present government document (Better Schools, Section 277) only briefly touches on accommodation. Its key sentence is lost in its second paragraph: "... there are still disparities in quality of accommodation and standards of maintenance which may hinder the implementation of the policies set out in this White Paper." This is quite an understatement. If this government was busy about what it has taken leisurely, then the education in this country would be allowed to be the best.